

Oct 15, 2006

## **Ghent went after insurgents with pistol**

By Joelle Farrell

*Courtesy of the Concord Monitor, Concord NH*

---

Soldiers practice for war. But no one knows how he or she will react when the battle is real. When that moment came for Spc. Richard Ghent in March, he'd been blown out of a Humvee and was lying on the ground in Ramadi.

The driver of the Humvee was dead and the staff sergeant in the passenger seat was badly injured and unconscious.

Ghent was wounded, but he didn't wait for help. He grabbed the only weapon on him - a 9 mm pistol - and chased after the insurgents who'd attacked his vehicle.

Yesterday, Ghent, 21, of Rochester, was awarded a Silver Star for bravery. The award is the third highest given for valor in enemy fire; Ghent is the first New Hampshire National Guardsman to receive the honor since the war on terror began.

Ghent says he was just doing his job. He seemed almost embarrassed by the attention he received at the ceremony, held yesterday afternoon in the drill shed of the National Guard Armory in Manchester.

After the medal was pinned on his uniform, Ghent faced the audience, which included 100 members of his unit, Battery C, 1st of the 172nd Field Artillery, who stood in formation. Up front with him were military officials, along with U.S. Reps. Jeb Bradley and Charlie Bass. Applause and shouts of "Hooah" echoed in the cavernous room, and Ghent flushed red.

"He's so bashful," said his grandmother, Loretta Lambert of Rochester. "He's like, 'Why am I getting a medal?' "

Friends, relatives and local officials praised Ghent for his actions, which helped save the life of Staff Sgt. Jose Pequeno, who was injured in the attack. Pequeno, the Sugar Hill police chief, suffered a serious brain injury and remains incapacitated at a rehabilitation center in Florida.

A few soldiers saw Ghent's actions in Iraq, but mostly they heard about it afterward. Staff Sgt. Matthew Bernard, who helped investigate the scene after the attack, remembers the trail of spent 9-mm ammunition heading toward the insurgents' position.

"It spread quickly, what he had done," said Bernard, 29, of Milford.

Courage under fire isn't something you can teach, Bernard said. "It comes from within, and he definitely executed without flaw."

Ghent served in Iraq with 27 New Hampshire Guardsmen attached to a Pennsylvania National Guard Brigade. On March 1st, soldiers in Ramadi were on heightened alert - they'd heard insurgents had planned a car bomb attack, Bernard said.

Ghent, Pequeno and Spc. Christopher Merchant were in a Humvee at a observation post when two vehicles loaded with explosives blew up near an Iraqi police station nearby.

Pequeno called in the attack over the radio. Ghent, who stood in the gunner turret, was the first to see insurgents on a nearby bridge. He yelled "Grenade!" according to soldiers' accounts and the citation for his medal.

Before he could turn his machine gun on the insurgents, he was blown out of the truck. Merchant, a soldier in the Vermont National Guard, was killed, and Pequeno injured.

When a Humvee of soldiers arrived to help, Ghent was chasing the insurgents. Ghent didn't even have a helmet on, let alone cover fire, said Sgt Frank Sorrento, who was one of the first soldiers to arrive.

Ghent drove the insurgents away from the observation post, firing nearly all of his bullets. More trucks of soldiers arrived, firing at insurgents in a battle that would last 45 minutes, Bernard said. Fifteen insurgents were captured and a dozen killed, Bernard said.

Sorrento helped load Ghent into his Humvee and took him back to camp.

Ghent had been shot in the back and suffered shrapnel wounds to his face and extremities. He called his mother before anyone else could.

"He said, 'No one calls my mom but me,' " said his mother, Nancy Williams. "Just listening to him talk, it sounded like he hurt."

Williams said she didn't contemplate her son's bravery until the ceremony yesterday.

"I was just glad he was alive," she said. "It's a lot for anyone to go through."

Bernard was injured by a roadside bomb three days after Ghent was attacked. He sustained a head injury and shrapnel wounds and spent time recovering with Ghent.

"He's a young kid, he's a specialist," said Bernard, who outranks Ghent. "But I was very proud to be his fellow New Hampshire Guardsman."

Ghent said he was honored to receive the award and it felt good to hear so much applause.

"It was a really, really good feeling," he said.

Ghent is putting together a display case for his awards, which include two purple hearts (he was injured by an improvised explosive device earlier in his tour).

Ghent is training to become an EMT and is scheduled to begin firefighter training at the state Fire Academy in March.

His enlistment is up in 2008, and Ghent said he isn't sure if he'll sign up for the Guard again. When asked about the possibility of a second deployment before his service is finished, Ghent shrugged.

"What's worse than what happened?" he said.